

ON

APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION.

BY

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And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them.—*Acts xiv*, 18.

It may be thought an ungrateful task, when the ministers of the Gospel do not, in some instances, enjoy that respect which they ought to receive, to attempt to derogate from the authority which may be imputed to them.

But such is the glory of the everlasting Gospel, that it is supported only upon truth. It is equally injured by enthusiasm on the one hand, and by contempt on the other. It must therefore be the wish of all true Christians that its ministers be viewed in their just light.

That the ministers of the Gospel are despised by many, is no evidence that they are not esteemed too highly by some. The persons in our text, who were scarcely restrained from paying divine honors to *two of this character*, soon after this denied they were honest men, and stoned one as unworthy of life. Now, this conduct, in both instances, was from the same principle. The people, in their applauses and persecutions, were influenced by idolatry.

In the beginning of our subject we are informed that Paul and Barnabas, being persecuted at Iconium, went to Lystra and other places in Lycaonia; that while at Lystra there sat a man impotent in his feet, who had never walked; that Paul said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on thy feet," and he leaped and walked; that the people, on seeing this, said they were *gods*, and called Barnabas, *Jupiter*; and Paul, *Mercurius*; and that the priests of Jupiter brought oxen and garlands to the gates of the city and would have done sacrifice with the people; which when the Apostles, Barnabas

and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out, "Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you." And then they declared unto them their office and doctrine; and with these sayings, Scripture observes, "Scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them."

Not only persons in heathenism, but those who profess the faith of the Gospel, have, in many instances, paid too high a deference to the ministerial character. Thus, *Cornelius*, who was a devout man and approved of God, from not being sufficiently acquainted with this character, fell down at the feet of Peter, and worshiped him. But Peter took him up, saying, "*Stand up; I also am a man.*"

And the Apostle John (though the instance be not exactly within the limits of our subject, yet, as it confirms the fact, it may be mentioned), who in a vision saw and heard many things, fell down to worship before the feet of the angel who showed him these things. But the angel said, "*See thou do it not, for I am thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them that keep the sayings of this book: worship God.*"

From every consideration, and from every example, it appears to be the *duty of ministers themselves*, when persons, either from ignorance or partiality, entertain too exalted an opinion of them, *to correct the mistake*, and to entirely refuse the undeserved honor; but more especially when it implies idolatry.

Our subject will lead us to consider when the ministerial character is viewed in too exalted a light.

As I design to vindicate the Christian Church from the errors of the present day, I would confine myself more particularly to two observations:—

1st. It is an erroneous opinion of the ministry to suppose that any order of men now in the Church of God are successors of the Apostles.

2d. That it is an erroneous idea of the authority of a minister to suppose that he has any other power to forgive sins than by the preaching of the Gospel.

I will state first, my brethren, that, with me, you are some-

times conscious that a sentiment is erroneous, without clearly perceiving the reasons of the fallacy. As the mind in each case is desirous of receiving satisfaction, and as the propositions before us are of great importance, let us consider the reasons upon which they rest:—

1st observation. That it is an erroneous opinion of the ministry to suppose that any order of men now in the Christian Church are successors of the Apostles, is, it may be thought, a deviation from our subject; since, to suppose that any men are successors of the Apostles, is not to think that they are divine. But to exalt a person in one degree above the station in which he is placed, is to err in favor of exalting him to the highest degree; and particularly in this case, as the persons who assert that they are successors of the Apostles, maintain that they are in similar senses the successors of Christ; therefore, their pretensions may be viewed in the light of requiring homage from men.

Omitting at this time the argument which is often adduced against there being a succession of Apostles, from the consideration that there is no power in the Church of God to consecrate an Apostle, which is evident in the instances of Matthias and Paul, I would observe: That it is pleaded, as a reason for the succession of this office, that Timothy was ordained Bishop of Ephesus, Titus of Crete, and Epaphroditus of Phillipi. It is said that these persons were invested with apostolic powers, because there is mention made in some instances of their being superior to Elders or Presbyters.

But this argument proves they were not invested with Apostolic powers; for the evidence that they were superior to Presbyters is not so certain as that the Apostles were superior to them. For in those passages in which their *pretended right to control Presbyters is asserted*, the apostolic right of the Apostles to *control them* is exercised. Thus the Apostle Paul says to Timothy, "Receive not an accusation against an elder or presbyter, but before two or three witnesses." Here the command is positive, "*Receive not*;" whereas, the duty enjoined with respect to the character of an elder, whether he were a deacon or an equal, may be

disputed. Paul, in writing to the Phillipians, says: "I supposed it necessary to send unto you Epaphroditus, my brother and companion in labor, but your apostle"—which is translated *messenger*. Here is a name opposed to absolute authority. He is called *brother, companion* and apostle; and yet Paul sends him; "*I supposed it necessary to send.*" Could Timothy, and Titus, and Epaphroditus be equal in office with Paul, and yet Paul be allowed to dictate to them; to command them doctrines, to direct their mode of conduct, and even determine the *places* in which they should labor? Rainer, is not this just the mode in which the bishops of the present day control their clergy? If those, then, who they pretend are successors of the Apostles were thus under the direction of the Apostles, they were no more apostles than *their clergy* are bishops. If Timothy and Titus were not equal to the Apostles, it cannot be imagined that any are.

Further: That the Apostles have no successors is evident from their being acknowledged by those who pretend to be their successors to be *their* apostles.

What bishop is there, as high as he has ascended, who does not think himself confined to the directions of St. Paul, equally as was Timothy? What bishop is there who does not take the writings of that Apostle as the theme of his exhortation, and enforce what he inculcated?

This is not the way in which we treat *our equals*. Why are not their own assertions *doctrines*, if St. Paul were not superior to them? He wrote his epistles in the character of an apostle; many of them are *prefaced* with *this title*. In governing themselves by the doctrines contained in the epistles, they acknowledge St. Paul to be *their apostle* equally with those to whom he wrote. *How, then, can they pretend to be his equals!*

Again: That the Apostles have no successors, will appear, if we consider that there is *no place on earth for a diocese* which is *not* occupied.

In Scripture, mankind are divided into two classes, Jews and Gentiles. Each of these has apostles. We know that *the Twelve* were the Apostles of the Jews, the only Apostles; for they shall sit on twelve thrones and judge them. It is

likewise said that Paul is the Apostle of the Gentiles. *Of what Gentiles? If of those only who lived in his generation, why is not this mentioned? If he be not the Apostle of all the Gentiles in all ages, why have his writings that authority in our churches? Why do we receive the Epistles, and directions which he wrote to his own diocese as equally indispensable to us? Why do not we neglect his writings, and receive the will of God from our own bishops only, if St. Paul be not our Apostle? If St. Paul be the Apostle of us and of all the Gentiles, and if there be a complete proportion of apostles for the Jews; where is there any room for a bishop who claims apostolic succession?*

Further: That the apostles have no successors will appear from the consequences of allowing the idea.

To say that the apostles have successors is to say that they have the right of *ordination*; and consequently all who preach the gospel without their license, or attend upon this ministry, are *schismatics* and *heretical*. And what is this but saying that the whole Church of Christ on earth (the only part of it which is immediately corrupt, the Papal Church) is schismatic and heretical?

There was a time when the power of the Pope was scarcely disputed, and when there were few ordinations, if any, but what were performed by him. The churches which, after this, dispersed from him he excommunicated. And there is no church on earth but his own which does not lie under the censure of his bulls. The Protestant Churches were excommunicated so long ago that all the present officers in those Churches received ordination after the decrees of the Pope, and from those whom he had excommunicated. And if the power of the Church to *revoke be equal to that of confirming*, then the ordinations in the Protestant churches are void, and all those Churches are schismatic. But this the Anglican Church will deny. They will say that a power which was justly given cannot be unjustly taken. That if their bishops were properly authorized, there was no reason for their being divested of their power, and that the excommunication of the Pope was of no avail.

This we are willing to allow. But this concession *does not*

remedy the evil as it respects the Christian Church at large. For if the bishops of the Anglican Church are successors of the Apostles, then those who dissent from them, and did not *receive ordination from a papal Bishop*, are intruders into the office, and schismatic in their denominations. Let us trace this sentiment in the various branches of the Christian Church, and see the propriety of it.

Let us, first, apply it to the Society of Friends, a denomination which is the most opposed to Episcopacy of any of the Christian Church. For while the Anglican Communion, more than any other, looks upon the *mode* as essential, the Friends, more than any other, look upon it as vain.

It is written in the Scripture, "Thou shalt smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered;" which plainly implies that it is just to judge of a ministry by those who attend on that ministry, and whose sentiments and conduct correspond with it. The piety of the Friends, and their conscientious example, are evident to all. Should you ask them whether they believe in Christ, from thousands you would have the reply that they *did*.

Upon the principles of the gospel, then, *all who acknowledge the gospel must believe them to be Christians*; for it is explicitly and repeatedly asserted, that he who believeth on the Son shall be saved.

How did these persons become Christians?

How did they hear of Christ?

Did they, contrary to the intimation of Scripture, *hear without a preacher*?

Have they been saved aside from the divine establishment; that is, aside from the foolishness of preaching? Yet many of them never heard an Episcopalian preacher.

Rather, do not their doctrines and practice correspond with the sentiments of *their own preachers*?

To proceed from the Friends, there are the Methodists and the Baptists, in their various orders. The Presbyterians, in their extensive jurisdiction, and the Congregationalists, in their innumerable societies. Shall we call all these schismatics, and deluded in their sentiments, and false in their practice?

What reason is there for it?

Do they not, with the Episcopal orders, acknowledge *One God*?

Do they not possess the same Saviour; and do they not believe in the same Spirit?

Do they not receive the same Scriptures as the word of God, and declare their belief in the same conditions of salvation; viz., repentance and faith, with fruits worthy of them?

Why, then, should we say that they are not truly religious?

But in favor of whom are we urged to make this concession?

In favor of those who have *more of the Spirit of Christ*? In favor of those who attend more devoutly divine worship; who exercise a more extensive charity, and whose system of doctrines and government is more free from human forms and ceremonies? If the Anglican Communion be not superior to some others in either of these respects, to deny that the others are truly Christian is to give up the power of religion to the form of it. If we give heed to the practice of religion, the evidences of piety are as conspicuous in various other denominations as in that of the Episcopacy. The person, therefore, who calls the practice of such dissenters *hypocrisy*, and their sentiments a delusion, must contradict the truth of religion, and sin against the light of heaven.

The argument from this point is, if the various denominations in the Church which do not enjoy, *as ministers, pretended successors of the Apostles*, exhibit an evidence of Christianity, and if, in this, they act consistently with their ministry, then their ministry has received ordination, and consequently, there are *no successors* of the Apostles.

Again: That the Apostles have no successors, will be fully proved if we reflect that there has been a necessity for persons to receive *ordination from others* besides those who pretend to be the successors of the Apostles.

Was there not a necessity for the Church of England to dissent from the Papal?

Doubtless there was.

Happily for the Anglican Church there were several

bishops who dissented likewise, and consequently it possessed the power of ordination.

Wherefore, permit me to ask, was there not a necessity for other bodies to dissent from the Episcopal Church of England?

What were the reasons of this dissension? Was it owing to pride? To any ambitious intention of *exalting themselves*? Or, to a temper of disobedience to religions in civil government?

Rather, was it not owing, in several instances, to their having enlightened consciences, which would not allow them to sacrifice their religious rights to human policy; and to connect with the doctrines of Scripture the commandments of men?

Without adducing any instances in support of this from the history of the various dissensions, I would ask whether, even within the memory of persons now living, a man could receive ordination from the Church of England without submitting to human assertions as to doctrines of Scripture?

When circumstances are such, it is the duty of a people either to submit their consciences to human rules, or to be destitute of the ordinances of the Gospel, or to have a ministry upon their own principles.

To neglect the ordinances of the Gospel cannot be a duty.

To resign our religious liberty to human policy *must* be a *sin*.

And therefore there has been, and is a necessity for persons to receive ordination from *others besides Episcopal bishops*, and consequently there are no successors to the Apostles.

When I say that the Apostles have no successors, I do not mean that their *characters* are in no respect represented. The powers which the true ministers of the Gospel possess were once enjoyed by them, and have been conveyed down by God as he hath pleased. In this sense, the character of Christ is, in some respects, represented. But my meaning is, that as there is one *Lord Jesus Christ*, so there are *twelve Apostles*, and *ONE APOSTLE* of the Gentiles; and that all succeeding officers in the Church are *inferior to them at least*

one order, and consequently, cannot pretend to be their successors.

I say this, not from any envy or dislike to the idea of that superiority which Episcopal bishops claim, *considered in itself*, for I acknowledge the same superiority in the writings of St. Paul and the other Apostles, and in the character of Christ.

Let me now call your attention to the second observation in our subject. That it is an erroneous idea of the authority of a minister to suppose that he has any other power to forgive sins, than by *preaching the Gospel*.

The doctrine of absolution, as it is mistakenly inculcated, is founded, by those who maintain it, upon the words of Christ to his disciples recorded in St. John's Gospel, xx, 23. "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." I shall not say that this commission has respect to all true ministers of the Gospel, equally as it had to the Apostles. But it is my design, in this part of my subject, to consider the meaning which it *must have had* as it referred to the disciples.

That it did not imply a right to pronounce upon any person absolute forgiveness, *even with conditions supposed*, will appear, if we reflect,

1st. That no one but God is acquainted with the heart. It is mentioned as being an attribute of his nature, that he searcheth the heart, and trieth the reins of the children of men. To forgive sins absolutely, necessarily presupposes a knowledge of the heart, and includes *more* than this knowledge.

That the Apostles did not know the heart (not to multiply proofs), is evident from the writings of St. Paul. He supposed that some among the Galatians were Christians. But after some time, he wrote to them in these words: "I stand in doubt of you; I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain. I travel in birth again until Christ be formed in you."

But if the Apostles did not know the heart, no one after them can pretend to this wisdom; and, therefore, the authority to forgive sins has ceased.

2d. That the commission is not to be taken in this meaning will appear, if we consider that there is *no token given*, by which a minister can *determine when a person* is a proper subject of forgiveness.

To say, that when a person repents, he is to be forgiven, is not answering the *difficulty* in this objection; for it is impossible to determine when a person has repented. The Apostles were unable to determine this, as appears from the writings of St. Paul already quoted. He *doubted* the Galatian converts. It is necessary, therefore, in order that a power of absolution may be exercised, that there be some sensible token by which it may be known who is a proper subject of the rite. And we find, that in the Papal Church, where this doctrine is the most grossly abused, they do require a sensible token. Thus they decree *penance* before forgiveness. And where the officers in the Church are avaricious, and look upon money as the greatest good, they bestow absolution upon receiving this. If a person cannot be forgiven without repentance, and if it cannot be known when a person does repent, then, in order that a minister may pronounce absolution, it is necessary for him to know, *by some sensible token*, when repentance is exercised. As there is *no such token* appointed by God, the commission of our Lord did *not* convey a right absolutely to forgive.

3d. That it implied no such power will appear, if we consider that the exercise of it would be inconsistent with other duties which are enjoined upon us. We are commanded, in Scripture, to love our neighbor as ourself. *Not knowing the heart*, we are commanded to make presumptions in its favor, and to forgive our enemies. We are commanded to exercise that charity which hopeth all things, which believeth all things, and which covereth a multitude of sins. We know that no person can be forgiven of God who does not truly repent. If a minister be under obligations to forgive many who do not repent, his absolution cannot surely be confirmed. Should it be said that a minister is under obligation to exercise *charity, and forgive as a Christian*, but he is *not*, as a minister, it may be answered, that there is no reason for such a distinction; and to suppose that a person *must forgive*

when his forgiveness can be of no avail, and that he must not forgive when the act would be efficacious, is equally absurd as to think that a person *must not be charitable till he has money to bestow*, and then, that it would be a *sin to give*.

4th. That the power to forgive sins cannot be taken in an absolute sense, is further evident, from the fact that the Apostles *never* exercised it. That they did not, we may presume from there not being the least shadow of evidence in support of a contrary supposition. Though many sinners came to them desirous of being saved, yet they never pretended to pardon their sins; but directed them to repent and believe in the *Lord Jesus Christ if they would have life*, or have a full remission of sins. Thus it was at the time of Pentecost; thus it was in the case of the Jailor; and thus it was in instances too numerous to be here repeated. If the Apostles had possessed the power to forgive sins, they doubtless would have exercised it. But though we hear of their preaching *Jesus Christ and Him crucified* to a great part of the world, though we hear of their baptizing many, yet we do not read of their pronouncing absolution, no, *not in one instance*.

Having considered what was not the sense of the charge which our Lord delivered to his disciples, let us now attend to its true meaning.

Our Lord, just before his ascension, according to St. Mark's gospel, said to his disciples, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; and he that believeth not shall be damned."

And according to the gospel of St. John, he said, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Ghost." And he said, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

That our Lord, in saying, "*whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted*," had reference to their *preaching the gospel*, is evident, since, in *preaching the gospel* they would fulfill that mission upon which Christ sent them, "Go ye and teach all nations, baptizing them." That it had reference to this is

evident, since in preaching the gospel they would either absolve or condemn the world.

You are sensible that a conditional assertion is, if the condition be fulfilled, a *positive* assertion.

As, for instance, if you say to me that if my eyes are open I see the light, if my eyes *be* open it is saying that I *do* see the light. And thus, if I say to you, that if you repent of your sins you shall be forgiven, it is saying if you *do now repent* you are already forgiven.

This was the *absolution* which Christ intended. He told his disciples upon what conditions sins would be remitted. He charged them to preach this to the world. He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Ghost," that they might not err in their doctrines, and that they might be qualified to preach, and then he said to them, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted," to confirm the certainty of the doctrine which he had commanded them to declare.

It is to be remarked that the Apostles were to preach a *new doctrine*, and many would not believe that sins would be *forgiven upon repentance*; or, that they would be retained by unbelief; and others might doubt of the certainty of it. The Saviour tells them to declare it, and that whosoever sins they *thus remit* shall be remitted, and whosoever sins they *retain* shall be retained.

That this was the *only* absolution which the Apostles *did give we must conclude*, since this was the absolution which the Apostles did give. We find it declared throughout their writings, that he that believeth and is baptized, or, so believeth as that he is sanctified, shall be saved; and he that believeth not shall be damned.

And, indeed, it would be a great undertaking to attempt to select *one in ten* of the instances in which the Apostles fulfilled their commission of forgiving and retaining sins by declaring this.

But it may be asked, if persons are *forgiven by God in consequence of faith in Christ*, with what propriety did Christ say to his disciples, "*Whosoever sins ye forgive?*" I answer, with the strictest propriety; because the doctrine of forgive-

ness was to be declared only by them, or from them. That it is not known in any other method will appear, if we consider the strict regard which God has ever paid to the office of the ministry. Thus, when Cornelius was heard in his prayer and accepted in his alms, and an angel was sent to him, *this angel*, instead of instructing him, commanded him to call Peter, who was then distant several days' journey, and to hear from him his duty.

From the Apostles only, and from Luke who labored with them in the ministry, have we an account of the life of Christ, and of his doctrines, and of the duties which were incumbent on his Apostles and *their discourses*.

Every one who is called to preach the Gospel has authority to declare, "he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." *This is an absolution or condemnation which each one must have read for himself, who has perused the Scriptures. It is an absolution or condemnation which is ever passed upon each individual person; and the whole world is either acquitted or condemned by it, since the Scriptures have gone out, or will go out into all the earth, and their voice unto the ends of the world, and the message of Preachers of the Gospel is that only which the Scriptures declare.*

If the doctrine of positive absolution cannot be supported upon the passage of Scripture which has been considered, it is *impossible* that it should be vindicated from any other. This the partisans of the doctrine will allow. And that it cannot be supported upon that Scripture is, I think, as evident as the light. "And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had done sacrifice unto them."

As a conclusion of the subject, I would call your attention to a few brief remarks:—

1st. It is an erroneous opinion of the ministry to suppose that any order of men now in the Church of Christ are successors of the Apostles. What then shall we say of those who pretend to be in the place of the Apostles?

When a person pretends to be superior to those who are equal to him in the sacred office, and claims the right to control those who are not more fallible, and perhaps, not more illiterate in Scripture than he, then he exalts himself

above what is evidently the highest present rank in the Church. What can we say of him, but that he *lords it over God's heritage*? that he is an intolerable Master, reaping where he has not sowed, and gathering where he has not strewed; and that so certainly as Paul will be confirmed, and the twelve, in their Apostleship over the Gentiles and Jews, so certainly this person will be reduced to the order from which he has exalted himself, and to which he belongs.

2d. From the subject, we learn the great importance of *faith* as a doctrine of the Christian Church.

Our blessed Lord, when he was about to leave the world, reduced the whole gospel to *two points*. "He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved; and he that believeth not, shall be damned." He mentioned *Baptism*, in addition to its literal meaning, to show that it must be a *faith* which *purifies the heart*. These doctrines he commanded his disciples to *preach*. *By these* the world will be either acquitted or condemned. *By these* mankind are absolved or condemned at this time.

Upon the single article of *faith*, *such a faith as is implied in Baptism*, hangs the fate of the universe. Shall we not consider, then, whether *our sins be absolved*, or whether they be *retained*; retained by *this doctrine*, and consequently retained in heaven?

3d. Are there no successors to the Apostles in the Church? And is there no authority in any minister to forgive sins but by *preaching the Gospel*? Hence, let us, my Christian friends, be induced to stand fast in our liberty, and to maintain *that form of doctrine* which was delivered to the saints, and which has been delivered to us.

Let us not be disturbed in mind at *names*, at *unseemly names*. Let us not be discouraged, if we be represented as *schismatics*, or even as *heretics*. Let them call us what they please. We will hold fast to the truths contained in the Gospel, and will have no fear what man can do unto us.

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